

Zen and Aikido Training

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I. Introduction

Because of the experiences of Zen training which I had along with my Aikido training, many of you directly or indirectly began your Zazen training under my influence.

Aikido has been regarded as "moving Zen" which defines the character of Aikido well. Although I am responsible for increasing Zen influences in our training in the Western Region, in particular among the senior members, young teachers, and kenshuseis alike, I have never discussed it with the members. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss Zen training and its increasingly important association with Aikido training.

To begin with, I would like to describe how I began Zen training which, in a passive way, was due to my teacher, Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido. What I mean by a "passive way" is that he taught me the importance of spiritual discipline along with martial discipline. However, the system of spiritual discipline he followed was based on CHINKON-KISHIN (method of pacifying the soul and regaining or recovering the spirit) derived from ancient Shintoism and its extension - the study of Kototama doctrine (the miraculous power of language inherent within the Japanese alphabet). The composition of O-Sensei's teaching of ancient Shintoism was based upon the KOJIKI', interpreted under the strong influences of Deguchi Wanisaburo of the Ohomoto Religion, who was the spiritual teacher of the Founder. The KOJIKI provides an account of the creation and development of the universe, along with the origin of the Japanese race and its state.

Although I was an uchideshi at the time, I found it extremely difficult to follow and I was unable to understand most of the words O-Sensei was using in his teaching. Shintoism was the spiritual backbone of his Aikido, and in order to understand his teachings, one had to understand the KOJIKI, which required extensive study. Unfortunately, I belonged to the generation whose education was strongly affected by the post-war policy carried out by G.H.Q. (General Headquarters of the Occupation Army), established in October of 1945 (I entered Junior school in April, 1946), the central premise of which was the systematic denial of the Japanese culture, tradition and history. Thus, the myth and the world view represented by the KOJIKI was, for a time, denied as unscientific, an absurd superstition. This view was even widely supported by the post-war Japanese academic world. As for myself, being brought up and educated this way, I found the Founder's teachings not only difficult to follow, but also apparently nonsensical.

Nevertheless, the Founder always emphasized the importance of spiritual discipline ("religious faith", in his exact words) and the practice of farming along with martial discipline, if one wished to achieve one's goals. I had no problem with following the practice of farming and martial discipline (I still do both even up to today). However, I could not avoid the increasingly strong internal resistance that, as time went on, built up within me toward the Founder's spiritual discipline. I suffered from an internal split and feared the loss of unity between the physical art and spiritual discipline which was supposed to be the underlying principle of the art.

I started to look to Zen training as a substitute for the Founder's teaching. As I see it, it was a positive turning point in my Aikido life. However, I can't deny that it was an escape from the Founder. That is what I meant by my reference to "passive way".

II. Aikido and Zen

The significance of Aikido as a martial art, which was a fighting art in its origin, is found within an affirmative/negative proposition reflected in the relationship of oneself to others - namely, to live or die, or, in the ultimate situation, to kill or be killed. However, we don't necessarily have to take the original martial expression solely as it was meant to be, but we can shift our perspective to more practical terms that are applicable to our life today. After all, the relationship of oneself to others can be interpreted as (or replaced by) a contrast between subject and object. Similarly, in philosophical terms, to kill or be killed can be represented by subject and object as well as by affirmative and negative. Therefore, it is possible to define the significant meaning of martial arts as a way to deal with one's subjectivity in relation to others. This gives Aikido a deeply existential character which is applicable to our life today.

Zen, on the other hand, is a profound discipline bringing about a confrontation with one's own original face and man's fundamental living principle, so-called "Honrai-no-Memboku" through engaging in the most direct, simple and primordial physical act of sitting. When Aikido, as a martial art, is defined as a way to deal with one's subjectivity in relation to others, as I have attempted to define it above, Zen can be viewed as a premise or precondition for martial discipline, and this is where one can find a strong connection between the two. Thus, Aikido can be called a "moving Zen".

As martial artists, we are familiar with the term "martial" and much accustomed to using it frequently. However, I doubt that we can really understand its original meaning, in particular as our understanding is based upon the type of training, conditions and environment we have created by training in a Dojo. In my view, however hard and intense our training may be, we are still very far from the essential concept of "martial" and are barely scratching the surface.

It is unrealistic to think that, in today's Dojo environment, we can simulate a situation, like jumping off a one thousand foot high cliff or, in Zen expression, taking a step off the tip of a one hundred - foot high pole², where one is forced to face a desperate plight, and where one is able to transcend oneself beyond life and death.

YAMAOKA TESSHU³, the swordsman who founded the Muto-Ryu School of Swordsmanship during the Edo period, understandably decided to introduce the training known as "Tachigiri-No-Seigan"⁴ to the practice of swordsmanship training. He already recognized the limitations of Dojo training, even at a time, on the eve of revolution (Meiji restoration [1868]), when Bushi (warriors) carried two swords and bloody incidents were an everyday affair. He was a serious Zen practitioner as well as a swordsman. His intention was to carry out a close inquiry concerning the essence of martial discipline by injecting the element of Zen discipline into the Dojo training (of swordsmanship) where the practitioners are forced to confront their own true faces by being driven into a situation where there is no escape.

Since olden times, one of the central issues that martial artists, as well as Zen practitioners, have faced was a question of what comes first - mind or technique or spirit or body. The following are the words of KAMIIZUMI-ISENOKAMI⁵ (1508-?), the founder of the Shinkage School of swordsmanship:

"Even though its technique appears poor and unrefined, it is the unshaken mind, unshaken even when one finds oneself buried under tons of rocks, that is the master one can rely on.

In the case of Mumon - Kan Case #29⁶, we also find an interesting presentation about this issue.

"A temple flag was flapping in the wind and two monks were having an argument about it. One said that the flag was moving, the other said the wind was moving. They could not come to any agreement on the matter and continued to argue back and forth. The Patriarch said, 'It is not that the wind is moving, it is not that the flag is moving, it is that your honorable minds are moving.' The two monks were struck with awe."

I don't pretend to have an answer for the above-mentioned debate. However, I believe the important message is that one should not look at things through a filter of dualistic views, but with a unified view of the mind and body as one. I firmly believe that the substantial nature of man cannot be divided into two realms.

This is the exact reason that I developed a profound interest in the TACHIGIRI-NOSEIGAN that Yamaoka Tesshu adopted in his school, with which he intended to bring

about the realization of man's original face using swordsmanship (martial confrontation) as a tool to ultimately attain the realization of oneness between the spirit, mind body and technique in their highest potential.

As I see it, the characteristic of Zen discipline is to bring about confrontation with one's original face without the impediment of intellectual and ideological speculation. In other words, all acquired conditions, learned behavior patterns which make up the underlying perception of self-identity must be put aside - at least for the time one is engaged in sitting which, again, is the most direct, simple and primordial physical act of self. It is by the self, for the self, and through becoming self.

As found in Dogen Zenji's (1200-1253) famous theme in the chapter entitled 'Genjyo-Koan' in the book "Shobo-Genzo"⁷

"To study the way is to learn the self. To study the self is to forget self. To forget self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove barriers between one's self and others."

III. Self in relation to others

There is an interesting interpretation of the issue of how one relates to others, as I have touched on above, by Rinzai Zenji (?-854 AD). He explains that any human encounter will fit into the following four phases:

1. Subject denies object.
2. Object denies subject.
3. Subject and object deny each other (simultaneously).
4. Subject and object accept each other (simultaneously).

What follows is my interpretation of those four phases. In general terms:

1. Survival of the fittest in a competitive society as its natural development.

2. The world of inferiors overthrowing superiors, identical to the idea of revolution - a natural development of Phase 1.
3. Mutual destruction (killing), identical to the situation of the world today, having massive nuclear weapons for potential confrontation - a logical conclusion of Phase 1 and 2.
4. The world of co-existence - the realization of an ideal society based on a common sensibility in its highest form.

Let me apply the described phases to Aikido principles in our training. Needless to say that what Aikido principles represent is #4. However, in principle, it does not reject phases #1, #2, and #3. Aikido does reject the notion of winning and losing, the so-called competitive principle. However, this does not necessarily mean that it rejects confrontation between oneself and others or between subject and object within the framework of preset conditions, so-called KATA (forms). Phases #1 and #2 correspond to the foundation of our training; more precisely:

Phase #1

Phase #1 corresponds to the relation of Tori to Uke;

Phase #2

Phase #2 corresponds to the relation of Tori to Uke when their role is changed in the training. The change of the role between Tori and Uke is characteristic to Aikido, indicating that every human encounter contains multiple meanings despite seeming, on the surface, to be the same situation.

It is the system in which the practitioners are enabled to relate to each other and to experience both being subject and object simultaneously in which Kata plays a central role and represents a common ground.

Phase #3

Phase #3 is known as "Aiuchi" in martial terms. It is the state of mutual and simultaneous striking down. Thus, it can be interpreted negatively. Despite the

seemingly meaningless destruction, on a deeper level it presents the ethical foundation of martial arts stemming from martial necessity. Its significance reflects antithetical concepts of "not to kill if one does not want to be killed", and "ready to kill if one is going to be killed".

Phase #4

Phase #4 is known as "Ainuke" in martial terms and means mutual passing through. Phase #3 is the martial, technical, mental, and ethical foundation for this stage. This is the realization of the co-existence and mutual recognition between the self and others. The Founder used to say that "Aikido is a way to cultivate a common (shared) sensibility". In these seemingly simple and non-elaborate words, I discovered the profound meaning presented by Aikido.

It is the realization of a common sensibility which Dogen Zenji has also described as I the ultimate realization in Zen discipline, saying, in his exact words: "To be enlightened by all things is to remove barriers in between one's self and others." In more simple terms, treat (relate to) the other the way you want to be treated (related to).

IV. Self in relation to self

The prior section contained a brief description of the relationship of oneself to others. I would like to present my experiences and observations in regard to self-confrontation (how to relate to oneself) in Zen experiences.

Many of you here already have experienced Rohatsu Sesshins and mini Sesshins which have been held on a regular basis. To briefly express the characteristic of the Sesshin, and, in particular, Rohatsu Sesshin, it can be said that it is "to throw oneself into the extraordinary, having isolated oneself from the lifestyle one has long ago adopted. Although the participants in principle reserve the right to exercise their freedom if they decide to withdraw or resign from the discipline, most of us choose to stay of our own will in surroundings where mental and physical freedom is restricted by the monestarial rules and conditions - including restrictions on sleeping, eating, walking, working, sitting, and so forth.

In essence, it requires the abandonment of ego, so-called self-identity, which is a product of many layers of acquired behaviors, knowledge, and perceptions accumulated since birth - such as our genetic, social, cultural, educational, ideological, professional, national and racial backgrounds.

Therefore, in addition to physical discomfort, to begin with, it is common to experience various types of emotional and mental turmoil in the form of resistance, rejection, anxiety, hopelessness, regret, despair, even anger and hate. It is the existential struggle of the lone wanderer in the darkness, associated with the fear and uncertainty of losing the world which he was sure of while being unable to sight a new horizon.

The characteristic of Zen discipline, however, carefully guides us in how to conduct ourselves in this painful process of self-investigation, not through intellectual analysis of what self-identity may be, but through leaving acquired conditions aside quietly as they are, regardless of where they may belong or not belong, without direct confrontation. It is the physical act of sitting which gradually (or suddenly) makes all acquired conditions beneath self identity fall off, layer by layer (or all together by a single blow of impact), enabling one to see one's originalface. This is the stage described by Dogen Zanji as "SHIN SHIN DATSURAKU" meaning body and mind simultaneously fall off (from the preconditioned self-recognition of what the self really is), of a common sensibility, and into ordinary mind.⁸

Having said that, one may wonder whether Zen embodies other antithetical disciplines aimed at intellectual or moral colorization and discolorization. Maybe that is true, and I have no problem with it. After all, Zen is a human creation.

Zen recognizes this potential danger of colorization or discolorization or falling into a trap while escaping from a trap. Rinzai Zenji's shocking yet meaningful words to alarm human nature about its potential to be colorized or to be discolorized were:

"If you seek for Buddha, you will be sucked in by Buddha's poison. If you seek for the progenitor, you will be sucked in by the progenitor's poison. Kill Buddha when you meet him. Kill the progenitor when you meet him. Kill the master when you meet him....."

The above words indicate that as long as one seeks the truth outside of oneself, one must be denied - regardless of what name the outside source takes including Buddha, progenitor, master or teacher.

Through my own experiences and observations, the above-mentioned process that the beginning Zen practitioner experiences, can be broken down into the following phases:

1. Mental, emotional and physical rejection or resistance with a sense of regret.

2. Resignation or giving up through the establishment of a self-imposed limitation, and seeking for its justification and reasoning.

3. Passive surrender by seeking reliance on external power; desperately looking for help from outside as one is driven into a corner where there is no escape. It is common to have a vision or illusion at this stage which has to be denied.

4. Positive resignation or surrender; giving up one's hold on whatever one was sure of, except sitting through whatever it may take. Basically, this is the attitude of dying and being reborn without having any expectations, reliance, dependence.

Needless to say, the above-mentioned phrases do not necessarily appear with a clear distinction between them, but it is common to see them interwoven..

V. Conclusion

As I have mentioned earlier, it is unrealistic to think that it is possible to create the above-mentioned process within today's Dojo environment. It is my belief, therefore, that Zen discipline can provide us with what the Dojo training is lacking. As Aikido is defined as a moving Zen, it is only natural, for our very need, to define Zen as static Aikido

On the other hand, if we can shift our perception into the objective situation of the world we live in today, it is not too difficult to recognize the situation as being very martial, as everyday life is full of many different forms of violence and threats - both visible and invisible. Examples are the spreading of incurable diseases; countless outbreaks of man-made disasters which take many human lives in one fell swoop, as well as natural disasters which highly advanced modern scientific technology often fails to prevent; the prevalence of organized and unorganized violent crime; increasing occurrences of local wars derived from nationalism, racism, and religious fundamentalism; and increasing ecological imbalance and poisoning on a global scale that mankind has never experienced before. Instead of limiting our perceptions inside of the Dojo training, it would be wise to expand our awareness into the bigger realm of everyday affairs where countless potential threats to our very existence are evident. In substance, it is a situation where we are forced to return to facing the basic question of who we really are, in our true face, thereby enabling us to face potential crises, which may become reality at any given moment, with the three principles of martial awareness: when, where, and with what - without being defensive or obsessed but with a free and open mind.

¹Kojiki (ancient record) was written roughly around 712 AD. It is one of the oldest written materials which contains a myth associated with the creation and development of the universe, leading to the birth-myth of the Japanese nation. Its authenticity has been criticized under the strong materialistic view of history which has dominated the Japanese academic world since the end of the second world war. However, it is increasingly regaining its authenticity lately through archaeological evidence discovered from ruins, proving the existence of the ancient Japanese civilization which, at one time, was considered to be one of the five major civilizations. The above view is also beginning to be shared by western historians for example in a recent book: "The Clash of Civilizations and Remaining of World Order" by Samuel P. Huntington.

² MumOn - Kan Case #46: "Seiko's Hundred - Foot Pole" [written by Mumon around 1228]

Seiko (986 - 1039) said: "How can you go on further from the top of a hundred - foot pole? Again an ancient worthy said:

‘One sitting on the top of a hundred - foot pole has entered the way, but is not yet the real thing. He must go on further from the top of the hundred - foot pole and reveal his true self in the ten directions."

The commentary by Mumon - Kan says that if we jump off the top of the pole, our own and everybody else's pole, we can love our enemies because we have none. All things work for the good.

³ Yamaoka Tesshu (1836-1889) was the founder of the Muto-Ryu school of swordsmanship.

⁴TACHIGIRI NO SEIGAN. The disciples of Yamaoka made a vow to engage in the following progressive training:

1st stage- Two day commitment to engage in 200 contests per day, alone, and without stopping against 20 opponents who are permitted to rest and attack in rotation. Prior to committing to the 1 st stage, the disciple had to carry out the training for 1000 days without fail.

2nd stage - Three day commitment - same as above.

3rd stage - 7 day commitment - same as above.

4th stage - 1000 days training without stopping, from 4 am to 8 pm each day, competing against 100 opponents per day.

⁵ KAMIIZUMI ISENOKAMI. The founder of Shinkage school of swordsmanship who was a regiment general under the Lord of Uesigi. After being defeated in battle by Takeda Shingen, he chose to become a masterless warrior despite receiving an invitation from Lord Takeda to join his army. He started to wander about the country to refine his swordsmanship. He defeated many famous swordsmen. Those who challenged him included Yagyu Munetoshi, the founder of the Yagyu-Shinkage school. Isenokami, as a war general had seen the art of swordsmanship being used only as a tool of destruction, but then sought a way to transcend it into an art of giving life instead of taking life. Later on, his vision was realized by his successor, Yagyu Munetoshi's son, Tajimanokami, who became the official swordsman and teacher to the Tokugawa Shogunate, and, carrying on Isenokami's vision, had considerable influence over the policies of the Tokugawa Shogunate which enabled him to establish the foundation of peace throughout the whole nation for 260 years.

⁶ Mumon - Kan Case #29. This is the case involving Eno 6th Patriarch. Mumon - Kan's commentary:

"It is not the wind that moves, it is not the flag that moves, it is not the mind that moves. How shall we understand the Patriarch? If you have a close grasp of the meaning, you will see how the two monks intending to buy Iron, got gold.

The Patriarch could not repress his compassion, and so we have this disgraceful scene.

The following is a commentary by Dr. R.H. Blyth, the author of *Zen and Zen Classics* Volume Q, first published in 1966 by Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, Japan. From this commentary I found the following extremely interesting:

"Eno adopts the Buddhist point of view, not Zen at all, and the Christian is not very different, if we change 'your mind' to 'God's mind.'"

All three opinions are of course right, none of them are wrong. The second makes everything objective, and the third makes everything subjective. The Zen attitude is always objective subjective, both or neither, or transcending both. The experience is anyway of poetry not of science, philosophy or theology.

⁷ Dogen Zenji [(1200-1253) the founder of Soto - Zen in Japan] means "Eye Storehouse of the True Law", and contains subjects ranging from basic points of Buddhist doctrine to monastery regulations and standards of conduct for monks.

⁸ MumOn - Kan Case #19. (Nansen's Ordinary Mind)

"Joshu asked Nansen: 'What is the Way?' Nansen answered: 'Your ordinary mind - that is the Way.' Joshu said, 'Does it go in any particular direction', Nansen replied, 'The more you seek after it the more it runs away.' Joshu: 'Then how can you know it is the Way?' Nansen: 'The Way does not belong to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is illusion. Not knowing is lack of discrimination. When you get to this unperplexed Way it is like the vastness of space, an unfathomable void, so how can it be this or that, yes or no?' At this Joshu came to sudden realization."